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ABSTRACT

A case study in program evaluation that demonstrates the effectiveness of qualitative research methods is presented. Over a 5-year period, the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities in Ohio offered a baccalaureate program (University Without Walls) to local employees of a national manufacturing firm. The institutional research office evaluated the impact of the degree program on graduates and employers. The academic programs were individually designed, monitored, and executed using institutional and business resources and stressed job relevance and acquisition of job-related skills in the context of a liberal arts education. The research office examined student files and individual portfolios, developed and administered a questionnaire, and interviewed graduates, their supervisors, and resource faculty within the firm. Qualitative methods were found to be appropriate for this study. Administrative outcomes included generation of material that increased visibility within the organization and that related directly to student recruitment. Additional program outcomes include the following: the degree has provided career growth for a majority of the graduates; students increased skills, knowledge, and self-confidence; and students' attitudes or performance on the job improved. (Author/SW)

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A CASE STUDY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:

METHODS AND ADMINISTRATIVE IMPACT

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A Paper Presented at the 23rd Annual Forum
of the Association for Institutional Research

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Third Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, Ontario, May 23-26 1983. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. R. Coleman, Chairman
Forum Publication
Advisory Committee

ABSTRACT

Over a five-year period, The Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities has offered a baccalaureate program to employees of a local division of a national manufacturing firm. The institutional research office was asked to conduct an evaluation study of the impact of the degree program on graduates and to assess employer benefits from the degree program. The academic programs were individually designed, monitored, and executed using institutional and business resources and stressed job relevance and acquisition of job-related skills in the context of a liberal arts education. The research office examined student products, developed and administered a questionnaire, and interviewed graduates, their supervisors, and resource faculty within the firm. Qualitative methods were found to be appropriate for this study. Administrative outcomes include generation of material which increased visibility within the organization and which related directly to student recruitment.

PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study in program evaluation. In so doing we will examine the effectiveness of qualitative research methods as applied to program evaluation and report the unanticipated results such a study can produce for an administrator.

BACKGROUND

The Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities (The Union) is a small private college offering B.S., B.A., and Ph.D. degrees. In July 1977 the director of the Union's baccalaureate program (known as the University Without Walls or UWW) approached a large aircraft engine manufacturing concern to explore possibilities of an in-house UWW program in the company. As a result, two pilot groups were formed and within three years seven persons had earned their degrees through UWW. In 1980 the company fully incorporated the UWW option as one of its many tuition reimbursement programs. By 1982 the UWW had awarded a total of fourteen degrees to company sponsored employees.

UWW programs are off-campus programs designed for the highly motivated working adult. They have a number of features that make them very different from traditional campus-based college programs. The average age of the student is forty-one. Degree programs are individually designed by the students with the aid of a faculty adviser and are approved by a review committee of experts in the major area of study chosen by the student. Within a liberal arts framework, a student is free to design a program around his or her interests and career goals. The student may also include experientially-based prior learning towards the degree

providing it is evaluated as being at college level. New learning is facilitated by means of learning contracts, agreements between the student and a faculty member describing what the student will learn for a given quarter. Experiential learning is encouraged. In addition to UWW faculty, students work with adjunct faculty, who are typically both academically qualified (holding at least a master's degree) and employed full-time in non-academic settings. Students gain enormously from the process, nearly all of them favorably comparing the UWW program to a traditional program.

In the spring of 1982 the UWW director asked the director of institutional research to conduct an evaluation of the UWW program in the company. There were two reasons for this. First, it was becoming increasingly apparent to the UWW administrator that the UWW should become more involved with industry and business in the future. Yet there were no available data to demonstrate exactly what took place when a company initiated an in-house UWW program. What was the effect of the program upon the employee? What were the benefits to the company? Were the company senior managers who were UWW adjunct faculty satisfied with the program? These and other similar questions needed to be answered.

Second, and more immediate, the UWW administrator was concerned that the relations between the company and UWW were becoming somewhat strained. The company was going through a budget reduction period and was examining all aspects of its employee benefits package. Because of the small size of the UWW program, not enough was known about it by the employee relations

managers. Yet neither UWW nor the company could offer a critique of the program and its effectiveness. No data were available to recommend termination, continuation, or expansion of the program. Therefore, it was necessary to obtain data on the program so that decisions could be made about its future.

METHODOLOGY

As a result of these concerns, the UWW administrator and the company employee relations managers decided that an evaluation of the program would be an appropriate way to answer their questions. A Task Force was set up, consisting of the UWW director, the Union's director of institutional research, two company managers from employee relations, and a graduate from the UWW program. The mission of the Task Force was to act as a conduit through which the company could formally authorize the evaluation study and to advise the research office on various aspects of the study. The Task Force met three times to determine the evaluation process and questions, research methodology and procedures, and the format for presentation of the data. The Task Force determined that the following five questions would guide the design of this evaluation project:

How do graduates of the program evaluate their experiences with UWW?

How do adjunct faculty in the company view the UWW program?

What are the program strengths and weaknesses?

What relationship, if any, exists between the student's academic program and job responsibilities?

In what ways, if any, did persons change as a result of the program?

Questionnaires were designed to obtain information on the above questions from graduates, adjunct faculty, and graduates' supervisors. The Task Force was concerned about the limitations of questionnaires especially for those areas of investigation requiring more detail than one might provide on a questionnaire, such as examples of change as a result of the UWW program or incidences of integration of work and study. Therefore, it was decided that interviews would be conducted with a limited number of participants from the categories of adjunct faculty and supervisors. All of the graduates would be invited to talk with the researcher. All participants would be mailed a questionnaire.

One of the methods to establish validity and reliability in qualitative research is triangulation. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981, pg. 257) "Triangulation is useful for verifying information on the same event from different actors or participants and also for producing more confidence in data generated by different methodologies." In this evaluation study, the researcher deliberately sought to structure triangulation, asking the same questions to three groups (graduates, faculty, and supervisors) and by the use of two methods (questionnaire and interview) so data from multiple sources and multiple methods could be compared.

During the interviews, the researcher followed an interview guide of open-ended questions, but pursued participant's comments with individualized questions, when appropriate. The taped interviews were replayed by the researcher and responses were categorized and compared to responses from the questionnaire. Pertinent quotations were grouped

according to themes and several were selected for insertion in the final report.

Questionnaires were mailed to all participants and a month later follow-up interviews were conducted at the work sites. Eleven of the fourteen graduates returned the questionnaires, and twelve graduates were interviewed. One graduate had left the area and could not be located. Seven adjunct faculty and supervisors were interviewed. Approximately 80 employees had served as adjunct faculty and another 14 served as supervisors. Of this total of 94, 72 were about to be located and invited to participate in this study. Responses were received from 42 persons, for a 58% response rate.

In addition, students' individual portfolios and files were examined. The UWW program requires a lengthy autobiographical application, extensive documentation of prior and new learnings on a quarterly basis, and the completion of a Significant Project, comparable to a senior thesis. The Significant Project is a project such as a procedures manual or a training program designed to test out and apply theories learned during the course of the program. Oftentimes such projects are work-related and directly benefit the employer. Therefore, the records review consisted of examination of:

(1) the student's application to the program to familiarize the researcher with the student's background and motivation for desiring a degree;

(2) demographic data on the student;

(3) correspondence such as letters from supervisors, adjunct

faculty, or company-related personnel;

(4) learning contracts between the student and faculty member to ascertain how and what the student learned and who served as adjunct faculty;

(5) the topic and content of the Significant Project.

A review of recent literature (Patton, 1978, 1980, 1982; Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Bruyn, 1966) substantiated the appropriateness of qualitative techniques for program evaluation studies. In addition, a recent AIR sponsored publication (Kuhns and Martorana, Ed., 1982) described the applicability of qualitative methods for institutional research.

Qualitative methods can be contrasted to quantitative methods in that

> Qualitative methodologies refer to research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior. This approach, as we see it, directs itself at settings and the individuals within those settings holistically; that is, the subject of the study, be it an organization or an individual, is not reduced to an isolated variable or to an hypothesis, but is viewed instead as part of a whole. ... Qualitative methods allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definitions of the world. (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, pg. 4)

Furthermore, Patton describes one of the values of qualitative data as follows:

> The detailed descriptions, direct quotations, and case documentation obtained by qualitative methods are raw data from the empirical world. The data are collected as open-ended narrative. There are no attempts to fit institutional activities or peoples' experiences into predetermined, standardized categories, as the response choices that comprise typical questionnaires or tests do. (Patton, 1982, pg. 5)

Qualitative methods were employed in this study because (1) the institutional research office desired to examine the applicability of qualitative methods suggested in recent literature; (2) the small group of graduates made it feasible to use qualitative methods and impractical to rely solely on quantitative analysis; and (3) the researcher thought that on-site interviews would provide a context for interpretation of comments, particularly in reference to work-study relationships.

Again Patton provides additional support in constructing a rationale for the use of qualitative methods in educational evaluation.

> To understand the unique, internal dynamics of a program it is best to approach that program without predetermined hypotheses about what those strengths and weaknesses are. Such an open-ended approach permits the strengths and weaknesses to emerge from the program observations and interviews rather than from the theories and expectations of the evaluator. An open-ended approach allows the evaluator to find out what is there rather than validating, confirming, or rejecting preordinate hypotheses about program strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the nature of program processes is sufficiently complex and interdependent that they are seldom easily represented along some set of unidimensional quantitative scales. Nor can quantitative dimensions and scales provide the kind of detail that is necessary for blueprints of program processes where the description of those processes are to be used in constructing models for purposes of replication and demonstration. Thus, qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for process evaluations. (Patton, 1980, pg. 61-62)

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

There were seven general findings reported:

(1) The UWW degree has provided career growth for a majority of the graduates

(2) UWW encouraged integration of work and learning as demonstrated by the fact that eleven of the fourteen Significant

Projects were based on work-related topics

(3) Students increased skills and knowledge

(4) Students' attitudes or performance on the job improved

(5) Company managers serving as adjunct faculty valued UWW program features

(6) Students' self-confidence or self-worth was enhanced

(7) A majority of the graduates identified personal satisfaction as the motivation for seeking a degree

These findings were supplemented by a series of recommendations made by the managers who had served as adjunct faculty. The recommendations were both general in as much as they suggested communications, public relations, and informational improvements between the company and UWW, and specific since faculty were concerned about improving individual stages of the academic process. The UWW staff is now considering those recommendations. For example, this study found that personal satisfaction was the motivation for seeking a degree, a finding which contradicts prevailing theory in adult education. Cross, Aslanian and others have argued that adults go back to school because they are "in transition." Changes in their life trigger a need for more and different training. The company-sponsored graduates from the UWW program did not view career change and upward mobility as their most important goals, nor did they enter the program because they were "in transition." As a result of this finding, UWW orientation sessions for students are being revised with a different emphasis.

A written report describing the study and highlighting the seven

findings was prepared by the institutional research office, reviewed by the Task Force, revised, and distributed to graduates, adjunct faculty, current students from the company, UWW staff, and key company managers.

IMPLICATIONS

At the outset of this study, the UWW administrator had explicit concerns about protecting the college-company relationship. The research office director was interested in examining the applicability of qualitative methods for evaluation studies. Finally, the UWW administrator, research office director, and the company employee-relations staff sought to acquire evaluative data on the program's effectiveness. The implications of this study address those objectives.

For the researcher, getting out into the student's work setting enhanced her ability to appreciate employees' job demands. Interviewing employees throughout the ten acre, eight building, and 10,000 employee complex added to her ability to interpret observations made, and, furthermore, contributed to her ability to adapt the interview questions given the context of one's job and one's program of study. Using the interview as one means of obtaining data, the researcher was able to directly interact with adjunct faculty and supervisors to ask questions requiring more in-depth responses than could be obtained from questionnaires. Several quotes from participants were included in the report and it was found such testimony strengthened the report and made it more interesting to read. Thus, the researcher concluded that qualitative methods yielded a different kind of data--narrative descriptions--which were found to be

equally as persuasive as quantitative data when presented to company managers. In addition, the narrative data supplemented and confirmed the data obtained from the questionnaires from the various groups and served to substantiate the positive effects of the program on the lives of the graduates. It is recommended that qualitative methods be given consideration particularly when multiple sources and methods can be used to verify data.

The UWW administrator found that the company management was satisfied with the written report evaluating the program and that there was now documented evidence of tangible results to the company from employees' enrollment in the UWW program. In addition, the administrator discovered other unanticipated outcomes, such as renewed alumni/ae interest in the UWW program resulting in the formation of an alumni/ae chapter; adjunct faculty were reminded of the program resulting in their referral of potential students; a few adjunct faculty and supervisors offered to continue supporting the program, one specifically volunteering to talk with managers of other companies about their satisfaction with the UWW program. Furthermore, the administrator was able to use the report as a recruiting tool when discussing the UWW program with other employers and companies. The report's effectiveness in this regard stems not from the fact that it is a glowing public relations piece, but rather comes from the fact that it appears to be authentic. It "feels right" as one manager explained.

Thus, the UWW administrator was pleased with the findings of the study, was satisfied with the strengthened relationship between the college

and the company, and was able to use the process of evaluating the program to build toward increased enrollment and renewed interest among company employees. What was learned is that the unanticipated findings had as much value for the administrator as the expected outcomes.

Further implications of qualitative evaluation studies include the need for institutional research offices to respond with appropriate studies and appropriate methodology when dealing with (1) adult learners (who are more experienced, knowledgeable, and articulate than significantly younger college students) and (2) college-sponsored programs which operate in business settings. Both these phenomena are likely to increase in future years and there may be opportunities for research offices to conduct evaluations of such programs. Incorporation of qualitative methods may yield useful narrative data providing evaluation information and the use of qualitative methods (interviewing, in particular) may contribute to fostering better relationships between the company and the college.

The institutional researcher needs adequate preparation before entering the business setting. The researcher entering a large company needs to be aware of the company's culture, values and politics. Had the managers in the employee relations department not been well respected in the company, for example, the researcher felt strongly that she would not have had the access to other managers that she had, nor would these managers have given so willingly of their time. Most importantly, the managers may not have felt comfortable in expressing their opinions.

It is critical when doing an evaluation of this type to develop a Task Force consisting of both internal and external persons to help overcome these problems. Those inside can assist with such variables as timing, i.e., what time of month to send out questionnaires and the best days to interview managers.

In conclusion, it must be recognized that qualitative methodology may require more time in the collection and analysis stages, but the information obtained may be more useful for particular audiences. At the time methodological decisions are made, the effects of unanticipated outcomes should be taken into consideration. An examination of such potential outcomes can help the researcher select the appropriate methodology.

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